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THE DYNAMIC CONSUMMATION OF TIME IN MICHELANGELO'S *LAST JUDGEMENT*

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Abstract: A study on how Michelangelo dynamically featured the final day in the *Last Judgment* of the Sistine Chapel.
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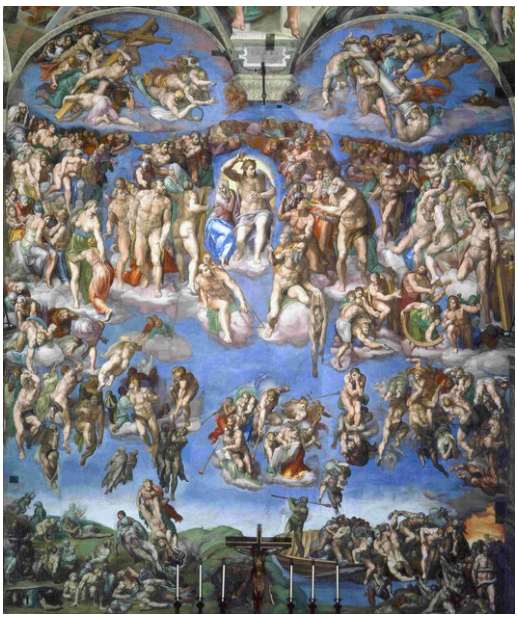
Like other masters of his time, Michelangelo also used the art of ambiguity to create ingenious works made of different layers of meaning, which enhance the intellectual content of the images.

Thus, instead of reporting only a specific moment or episode, these creations condense broader logics and dynamics.

Such is the case with the paintings created by this master for the Sistine Chapel, specifically the fresco of the *Last Judgment* on the altar wall[1].



Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, Sistine Chapel [wikimedia.org].

1 Regarding Michelangelo's iconographic devices in the Sistine Chapel, see the research compiled in *Italian-crafted. Studies 2012-2016* [archive.org], as well as the corresponding chapters in *Leonardo X Michelangelo* [academia.edu | archive.org].

Thus, the announcement of the end times and the advent of eternity is made through the adaptation or reinvention of traditional images relating to the Annunciation and the Nativity, presenting Jesus as the "the Alpha and the Omega the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev.22:13).

Comparative examples[2]

Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, det. [wikimedia.org].

Simone Martini, *The Annunciation*, det., Uffizi [wikimedia.org].

Parmigianino, *Madonna with the long neck*, Uffizi [wikimedia.org]. The artificially enlarged body of the newborn foreshadows his crucifixion in adulthood.

João Afonso, T*he Virgin of Piety*, MNAA [PMO]. In this sculpture, the body of Christ was diminished to suggest the Nativity, i.e. an allusion to the resurrection (≈ rebirth).

2 Regarding the logic of these and other similar works, see for example *Octógono* n.4 / Junho de 2024 – "A Lamentação Feliz de Santa Maria de Belém" [academia.edu | archive.org].

One can find in Jn.26:20-22 a theological basis for these allegorical exercises that link birth to resurrection, and in some cases also to the culminating second coming of Christ, as can be seen in some paintings.

Pietro da Cortona, *Virgin and Child with Saints*, det., Brera [wikimedia.org].

In this example, Jesus' gesture prefigures the Final Judgment and the respective sentence addressed to the condemned: "Then he will say to those on his left [*sinistra*], Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt.25:41).

In this layer of meaning, St. Catherine is called upon to play the role of a haughty queen who hears the sentence in anxious disappointment (instead of the humble, grateful, and relieved Franciscan on the right).

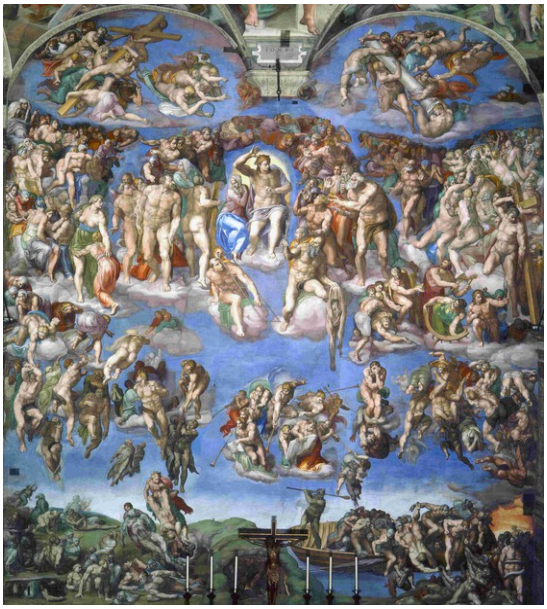
In Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, the central image follows the same logic, albeit in a classicist syncretism (in the manner of Florentine Neoplatonism). Thus, Apollo-Christ prepares to unleash a punishing lightning bolt[3] (in the name of his father; Jupiter ≈ God the Father; regarding the delegation of powers for the Last Judgment, see Jn.5:23). In this sense, Jesus himself is a lightning bolt emanating from God (Lk.17:24).

Conceived on the edge of ambiguity, this same gesture also suggests an imminent embrace of the Virgin who is at his right hand (≈ the saved) and appears serene but also impressed by the entire overwhelming spectacle, simultaneously terrible and terrific.

3 The visual connection to the famous drawing *The Fall of Phaeton* (British Museum) is obvious and has been noted in historiography.

Figured therefore in a dual dynamic, Christ is seated to judge and to welcome the blessed under his "wing", but he also rises up to strike down the damned[4].

In this process, individuals are acquitted or condemned according to their observance or non-observance of the essential commandments. Therefore, as argued in another contribution[5], the altar wall was redesigned by Michelangelo to suggest the outlines of the Tablets of Moses, with Christ at the center as the ultimate Judge of the old law as well (Mt.5:17).



Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, Sistine Chapel [wikimedia.org].

Albrecht Dürer, *The Landauer Altar*, det. (Moses) Kunsthistorisches Museum [wikimedia.org].

Similarly, the mentioned wall also suggests a skull, where, for example, the eyes correspond to the lunettes, while Christ occupies the nasal area (not by chance).

This visual suggestion has already been noted by other authors: Sue Binkley saw in this wall the silhouette of a human face, while Philip Dayvault and Jos Verhulst argue that it is an enlarged transposition of the wounded face of Christ imprinted on the Holy Shroud of Turin – one of the most important relics in the Italian peninsula[6].

In turn, Rebecca Jelbert proposes that the overall composition on the wall amplifies the defiant face of a skeleton present in the same fresco, namely a symbolic self-portrait of Michelangelo.[7].

4 Michelangelo conceived a similar ambiguity in the aforementioned *Fall of Phaeton*, here using an eagle.

5 *The Sistine Chapel of Michelangelo: the Law and the Judge*, 2013 [academia.edu], collected in *Italian-crafted. Studies 2012-2016*, pp.123-130 [archive.org].

6 Jos VERHULST, *The Embedment of the Face on the Shroud of Turin in Michelangelo's Last Judgement: A Corroboration of the Dayvault Hypothesis*, 2014.

7 Rebecca JELBERT, *Michelangelo's Puzzle: Forgery, Star maps and the Sistine Chapel*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025.

Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, Sistine Chapel [wikimedia.org].

Amplified overlay of the skeletal face on the wall, by Rebecca Jelbert [wikimedia.org].

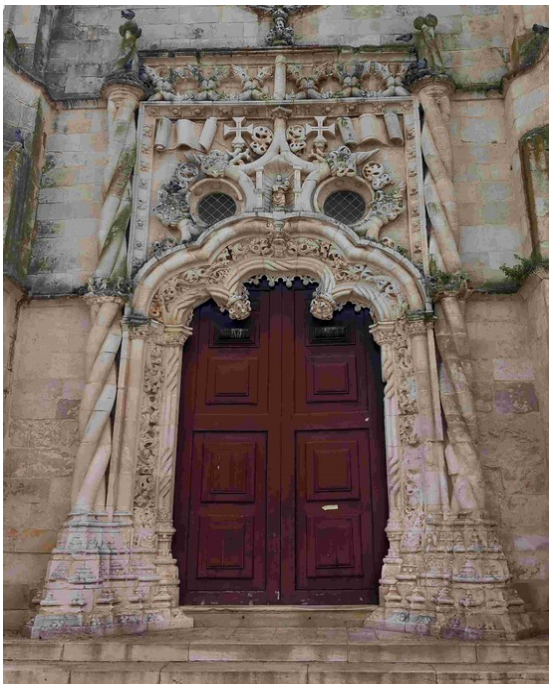
In fact, the aforementioned interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and the issue may even have another starting point.

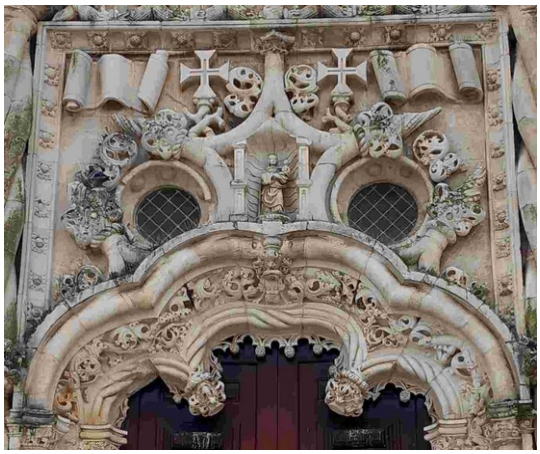
Thus, the large mural skull made of many figures represents mankind personified in Adam, who, upon being created, received the divine breath through his nostrils (Gen.2:7)[8].

8 In turn, it is logical that angels occupy the area of the eyes, since these are traditionally considered to be the windows of the soul.

However, soon influenced by Satan and thus fallen into mortality, Adam's flesh (and that of his countless descendants) decays into demonized bone.

This suggestion of a large damned skull (but maintaining the original divine reference in the nasal area) has precedents[9], as can be seen in the elaborate and multilayered anthropomorphic portal of the church of Golegã, from the beginning of the 16th century.





Portal of the Church of Our Lady of the Conception, Golegã [PMO].

But Jesus brought the possibility of redemption, making it necessary to follow and imitate him. Catholic movements such as Devotio Moderna and publications like the hugely popular *Imitation of Christ* insisted on this point, to which Michelangelo was particularly sensitive (which justifies the homage to Jheronimus Bosch, whose influence was also transcendent in Italy)[10].

It also explains the penitent enlargement on the wall of the Italian master's cranial self-portrait, as if he were the greatest of sinners. After all, as Christ warned, "whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Mt.10:38).

In this context, Jesus is naturally the model and the redeemer – the New Adam (1Cor.15:22, 45-47), better elucidating the fact that the features of the Messiah are also superimposed on that enormous face on the altar wall (≈ sacrificial Mount Golgotha, Skull)[11].

9 See for example the anthropomorphic decoration at the top of the painting *Madonna with Saints* by Giovanni Bellini (Church of San Zaccaria, Venice).

10 *Bosch, the surdo canis*, 2013 [academia.edu], collected in *Northern Art. Studies 2012-2016*, pp.63-79 [archive.org].

11 In other words, Adam and the New Adam are superimposed, as can also be seen on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (*The Sistine Ceiling and the Holy Spirit*, 2013 [academia.edu], collected in *Italian-crafted. Studies 2012-2016*, pp.107-110 [archive.org].

Thus, mankind on the last day recovers its flesh to face its destiny, before the judge who "is standing at the door" (Jas.5:9).

On that apocalyptic wall shaped like a head (*caput* in Latin), the Messiah is the powerful and implacable judge, but above all, he is the Resurrection itself (Jn.11:25).

In conclusion, and in one sentence, Michelangelo makes ambiguity an art in its own right, in this case to evoke not only the Last Judgment, but also to synthesize its theological context.